

18. FAINTED AWAY

Tuesday, May 22, 1945

Another warm morning promised a hot day when the sun woke up hundreds of prostrate bodies from their well-deserved rest. As I came to it I had difficulties in realizing where I was and whom all these grey figures were laying on the ground. Some of them were moving already and were walking to the brook for a wash and to drink water that was to be our breakfast. Vet got up and forced me to walk with him to do the same. We looked around us and wondered whether we are still prisoners as there were no guards around. No shouts or commands were heard. All was so quiet except for the murmurs of greeting or painful complaints under voice from the prisoners.

We reached the brook and started washing ourselves. What a joy to get rid of days' old crust of dust and perspiration! What a sensation to feel the clear water on your skin! Still, we did not undress to take a full bath as we felt that the dried dust was some sort of protection for our tired bodies. So we would have to carry on with it during this endless march of ours. I sat down to inspect the soles of my feet and was happy to find out that, apart from a strong layer of dust and dirt, they did not show any wounds or blisters.

As we came back to our place of rest we found that the others were forming groups again according to the military districts under the surveillance of what looked like the former officers. We learned that some prisoners had left on their own most of those that came from nearby towns or districts. For us coming from the more eastern parts of Croatia it would be utter stupidity to try getting through on our own without any permits or appropriate papers. Staying together in a group was the only answer and quite frankly, I didn't have the wish to start out on my own and be left to my own devices. Now, getting something to wrap around my feet was my main and only concern. I found some old wire and together with this managed to fasten the threadbare bits of material I still had around my feet. For how long would it last?

Around 8 a.m. we saw some soldiers coming from the direction we had been coming to the day before. By this time we had formed the groups of prisoners from the various districts again. In the one of Osijek I found myself surrounded by some well known faces once more, among them that of Dr. Franjo. There I didn't find anybody of my school classmates or anybody from my battery. Soon after usual shouts and commands pressed we slowly moved onto the road and left the green field and the refreshing river behind us. Our group was again at the column head more or less and we started out at a fast pace probably because the soldiers wanted to finish with this awkward task soonest. Also, of course, they were well rested and fed.

The day grew hot again but our guards were mercilessly driving us on with shouts and scuffs and some occasional blows to the nearest prisoners. They were not Croatians but we were too tired to find out where this new lot came from. The stops were short so there was no chance to find any drinking water. So the march went on with all well known but still ominous sounds of blows and kicks to be followed by few anguished cries, a shot and then was silence again. The vicinity of death was everywhere and around us so it was as if the swift movement of the Scythe might find you at any moment.

In spite of the one night's rest fatigue soon took over making us slow and senseless as we marched through few villages of the Turopolje Plain. After Vukojevac, Lekenik and Zazina we passed through the village of Odra and crossed over the river of same name close to its confluence in the Kupa River. We were now approaching a larger town of Croatia such as Sisak, in that Serbs lived among the predominantly Croatian population. The Serbs had been made to suffer during the regime of the Independent State of Croatia and many of them had joined the partisans.

We entered the suburban part of Sisak in the late afternoon after an endless march of more than eight hours and over 30 kilometres. A rather deep drainage ditch boarded both sides of the stony macadam road, as this area was often flooded in springs, when the two rivers overflowed their boundaries. Beyond the ditches were wide strips of grass with occasional benches under tree trunks used for a rest and to chat at evenings. A footpath of red clay bricks ran in front of the houses all of that had the entrance door leading into a gallery at the house longer side opening to the internal yard. Adjacent to the entrance was a high wall with a wide gate leading into the yard and other farm buildings behind. We had entered Sisak from the north on one of the main roads.

Suddenly the column was led off this road and over a narrow bridge forcing its length of four rows to stretch and elongate and slowing us down in our path considerably. Just as I congratulated myself for being rather at the column head I heard a piercing cry up from the front that followed by shouts and more cries of pain. I was wide awake instantly anticipating that this could only mean the danger and fast as lightning came the instinctive caution as we saw some men to stumble and fall. The others were trying to step over them so soon we had reached that place and could see the trap that had been laid for us this time. Wires had been stretched from a house to the other side of the footpath where these were fastened to a near tree or to a small post hammered into the ground for this purpose.

The wires were crossing our path at about ankle's height thus created an excellent trap for anyone coming up unsuspecting and as tired and worn out as we were. To make it even worse, most of the wires could be operated from the house entrances so that just as we stepped over one found that the wire had been brought up higher. People were standing in the doorways and under the trees opposite to houses and waited for a prisoner to fall so that they could get at him with sticks and whips, shovels or pitchforks and even with bare hands. None of them wore a uniform as they were all civilians living in this part of town and they obviously thought it a splendid spectacle of revenge. Revenge for what?

We tried to get through by running, stumbling, catching ourselves up again or being helped by a comrade, often hindered by the ones in front or pushed by the ones behind us - but watching out for the wires underneath all the time. The blows and lashes, shouts and curses were all around us. This infernal nightmare seemed to last for hours as we ran as a flock of scared animals forced into the runway to headmen's wagon. I will never forget the laughter of these people, the vulgar sound of humans venting their anger on a fellow human being.

This is what it must have been like in the French Revolution, I thought irresponsibly, as I tried to keep as close to the houses as possible where people were mainly busy with the wires. My loose foot wrappings represented a particular danger in this deadly game but I was lucky and passed several wires that were not pulled up yet that is just stretched across the pathway. In all probability the owners were busy on the other side of the footpath with sticks and pitchforks.

What saddened me most was the number of women and children I saw watching from the doorways, laughing and making fun of the prisoners that stumbled and jumped like hares over the wires and avoiding the blows. What had the world come to those women whose sons or husbands might be lost in the war or missing or taken prisoners themselves that they could laugh in such a way at us, a group of men who had fought for the country that was theirs? In some cases the women "operated" the wires and vulgarly jiggled when somebody tripped over offering some others to strike on the poor fellow what ever was at hands.

Suddenly without any warning I was hit by a hard object at the groin. A terrible pain spread all over me numbing me with shock and taking the air out of my lungs. I saw the grinning faces in the nearby doorway swimming before my eyes and some indistinguishable movement sent me stumbling. Then I lost consciousness. The pain, which horrible pain spread from my groin to the abdomen and up to my chest enveloped me like a big black cloth. Ah, then was silence! Let me rest! I should lie down and rest until all this is over!

"Walk, keep walking! For God's sake, walk Zvonko! WALK!" - A voice was shouting in my ear and slowly brought me back to the reality. I couldn't see with my eyes being full of tears and dust. I couldn't speak as my tongue went dead but I was able to realize where I was and that someone was holding me with a firm grip. It was under my armpit pulling and pushing me until my weak legs could support me again. I heard words of encouragement but I couldn't give any sign of hearing them.

I don't know for how long this went on but I remember that we managed somehow to make our way forward and out of this snake's pit of crossed wires. After a while, I became aware that I was held and guided by two people, both holding me under the arms and exchanging brief warnings as we stumbled on. For a shock moment I thought I had lost my eyesight because all was dark around, I couldn't see the sun until I found out that the sun had set and we were walking in the road again.

"My God, what has happened to me?" I had found my tongue again and turned my gaze to the man on my right.

Like through a haze I recognized Dr. Franjo voice saying: "It's alright, my boy, just keep on walking. We'll hold you till you're completely recovered. You did well, you're safe now."

I saw that Dr. Franjo was supporting me on one side and Vet on the other both grim faced and staring straight ahead. He said whispering to me: "Somebody had aimed at your groin as you passed a doorway. Bloody those savage women! They are all bitches! They were even more brutal than the men at Sveta Nedjelja."

I shook my head, partly to get it clear but also because I simply couldn't understand what had happened. I just had to ask: "But why were they so savage? Their own men could have been among us! I simply don't understand all this!"

"They thought we were Ustasas or at least most of us. Didn't you hear them shouting "Bloody Ustasas" or "There you Ustasa swine, that would teach you". Haven't you hear that slogans?"

No, I hadn't heard that or at least I hadn't understood the words. I had been too busy trying to find my way through the tangle of wires and the people operating them. But did those civilians really believe that their wartime tormentors had been brought back as prisoners of war now? Surely they must have been told who we were or perhaps not on purpose. Even our own guards probably didn't know the facts correctly. The war had ended a fortnight ago but the hate and the desire for revenge were still spreading a bloody spoor along the roads.

Vet later told me how the head of our column had run back onto the road at next bridge crossing when they saw what lay ahead. However the guards had driven them back onto the footpath. That's when the chaos started and everyone just ran ahead and trying to get through. Dr. Franjo and Vet noticed my fall only after a split of a second turned back to drag me up and with them. I must have been walking in a dead faint for some minutes and it was probably the crowd of other prisoners around me that had saved me from being beaten badly or even killed while I lay prostrate there. I was still shaky from the shock and my hands trembled badly when I tried to lift them to rub the dust off my face. Undoubtedly I was alive, alive in spite of these horrors of Sisak.

It was completely dark when we turned off the road into a sort of compound that smelled of wet clay. The humidity of the air told us that we must be close to a river and soon we found out that the place we were in was an old brick factory close to the Sava River. The dampness everywhere was a welcome change to the dust and heat of the long march of that day. Nevertheless we had to search for a dry ground to make our beds there. We were too late to find a spot in one of the buildings and just as I was ready to slump down on the wet clay when Vet came with good news that he found a shed in which bricks were laid out for drying. He pulled me up and nearly carried me to our shelter, as my legs were still weak though the pain was subsiding. I also noticed that feelings came back to my private parts.

I could feel the small bag with gold coins between my legs and the roughness of my trousers against the soft skin between my thighs. It was all there but it was all soaked in urine and I wanted very much to wash myself. I just lay down on the blanket that my friend had spread on the floor for me as I was too tired and weak to go hunting for water. Thus I gave myself to the blissful remedy of the sleep instantaneously.

Sometime in the night I woke up with the strong need to relief myself. All was quiet around me the only sound was that of snoring. I got up and crawled out of the shed to a nearby tree. I knelt before it and leaning my head against it for support started to urinate. It was painful and I wondered whether I was passing blood with urine and what would happen if I did it. After I had finished this painful task I turned around, being too weak to return to the shed, I sat against the tree looking up to the dark sky and the stars that glittered down at us unperturbed and indiscriminating.

I must have fallen asleep under the tree because suddenly with my teeth shattering I found myself sitting there. Very slowly I crawled back to the shed and to my place against the warm body of my friend.

The morning found hundreds and hundreds of tired bodies strewn all over the factory compounds with the lucky ones inside and others just where they had arrived last night. And what a very sorry sight we were! Worn faces over bodies in tattered rags and rarely a sound piece of clothing on. My footwear hardly resembled any kind of boots or shoes as

always there was a part foot exposed foot. As the men crawled or walked around, their faces and hair covered in dust and sweat and very often dried blood, they presented the epitome of all the ravages of war: the human race at its lowest.

I didn't have a mirror but I didn't need one to know that I looked exactly like all those men around me. I felt it in my bones that tired weariness of the hunted animal. I noticed that I had our blanket to myself and briefly wondered where Vet might be before I dozed off again.

I was rudely awakened when some water was splashed over my face. Sitting up slowly I saw Vet standing before me with a tin of water. The sudden movement brought the pain back to my groin but it soon vanished again so I was able to get up and walk over to the other men in our group who had spent the night under the same roof. What a roof it was, though. A derelict building with a roof full of gaps and holes over a floor of hard clay that had spread fine yellow dust over our clothes and made us look as if we were workmen in a flour mill. The dampness made the dust sticky and I can still recall the unreal and eerie sight of these tattered men painted yellow walking about or curled up on the floor.

The day passed without any notable events till the rumour spread that some food had arrived and was being dished out. We were too far from the compound's entrance and therefore one sent out some scouts. They soon came back with the news that some soup and a few pieces of bread had been handed out but had been taken by the first in line. It was not nearly enough for the number of hungry men that the entire group of prisoners represented. So I stuck to the water Vet had brought and to my bacon rind covered in crumbs which I still kept wrapped up in a kitchen towel. I gnawed off all the crumbs and kept chewing the bacon rind for some time. Then I carefully wrapped it back into the towel that contained a few more crumbs for my next meal.

Then I found a quiet corner and settled down for another rest. The day passed and night came without any order to move on. Vet and I made a bed of dry dust and spread the blanket over to find it almost soft after the hard clay we had slept on the night before. Just as we were about to fall asleep we heard that some more prisoners had arrived to the old brick factory late on Thursday, May 24, 1945. It seemed to us that our captors are gathering prisoners here but to what purpose nobody knew in reality?

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